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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022
www.sde.idaho.gov

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Superintendent Ybarra introduces resolution for civics standards

(BOISE) – A proposed resolution to put statewide emphasis on students’ understanding of government and society advanced to the Idaho Senate floor Wednesday afternoon by unanimous vote of the Senate Education Committee.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra presented the resolution to create standalone civics standards for all grade levels, saying it will “send a clear message that Idaho values civic engagement.” The measure is co-sponsored by Sen. Jim Patrick, R-Twin Falls, Senate Education Committee Chairman Steven Thayne, R-Emmett, and House Education Committee Chairman Lance Clow, R-Twin Falls.

Civics is among the topics incorporated into Idaho’s social studies content standards by grade level, and last year the Fordham Institute’s evaluation of states’ civics standards nationwide gave Idaho a D for lack of rigor and “awful presentation and organization.”

Social studies standards are up for review this year as part of the state’s regular review and adoption cycle. This resolution endorses Ybarra’s plan to ask the review committee of teachers, parents, legislators and experts to separate all of the civics standards and “into a nice neat little package while we’re already working on the social studies standards.”

The repackaged civics standards would be easier for educators and parents to access and understand, and they would help address concerns about indoctrination, Superintendent Ybarra said. They would not create additional burdens for districts and charter schools in terms of separate courses or teachers, she said.

Civics, basically, is the study of the rights and duties of citizenship. Idaho Code already requires that instruction in citizenship be given in all elementary and secondary schools, and all high school students must pass a civics examination in order to graduate.

Some of the reasons for standalone standards, as listed in the resolution, include:

- “Civics education is essential in ensuring that students are informed and effective citizens who understand their responsibilities and rights;”
- Public schools should promote students’ knowledge and understanding of the foundational principles of the American system of government, including the Constitution, rule of law, separation of powers, judicial review and federalism;
- “... an understanding of natural law as recognized by the American Founders ... underpins the Declaration of Independence and the thinking of the Founders.”

Revision of content standards is a long careful process, led by a committee of stakeholders, that provides numerous opportunities for public input before revised standards are presented to the State Board of Education and the Legislature for approval.

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